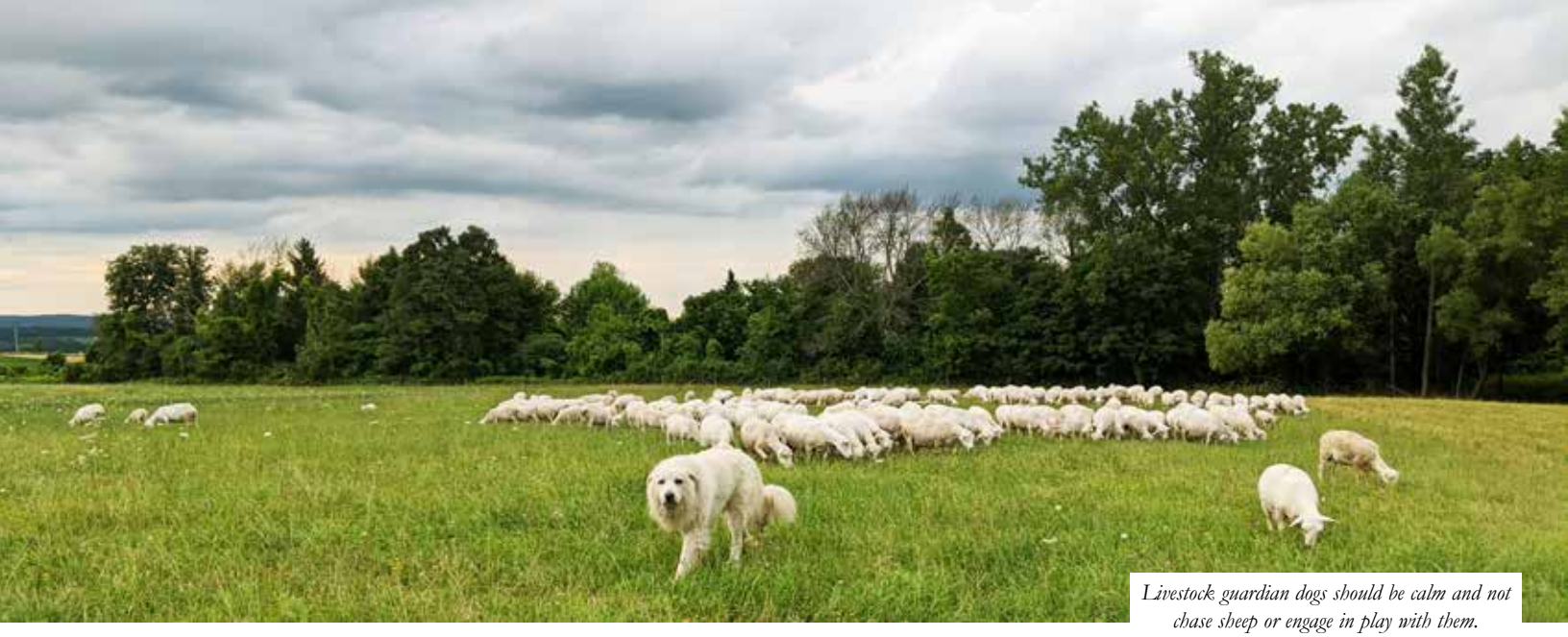


Livestock guardian dogs should be calm and not chase sheep or engage in play with them.

What It Takes to Successfully Raise Sheep on Forage Without Any Grain

Part 2 of 2

—Ulf Kintzel

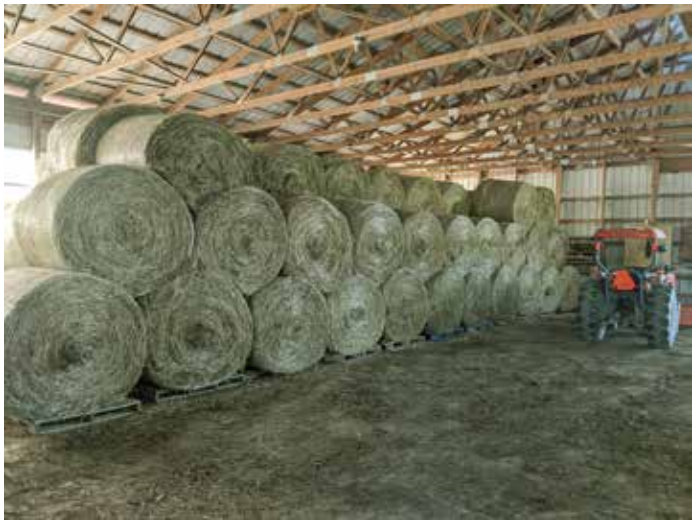
Most of my readers live in areas that require winter feeding. The length of winter feeding should be reduced by stockpiling pasture and grazing it well into the winter. I graze about nine months of the year. My pasture usually lasts until early to mid-January. Stored winter feed consists either of dry hay or of baleage. To this day, I still encounter a lot of misconceptions about the nutrient content of hay or baleage at various times of the year. I also encounter misconceptions about what nutrients people should be looking for in hay. The two misconceptions go hand in hand. For example, how many times have any of you heard producers of hay rave about how soft and leafy their late season "second" cutting hay is and that this is the hay you should feed? Likewise, how many times have you witnessed people dismissing first cutting hay as inferior in quality? Lastly, how frequently do you hear a lot about the percentage of protein in hay but hear very little talk about energy, which is always mentioned after the protein content in almost any conversation, if mentioned at all? Let me start by addressing first versus "second" cutting hay. First cutting hay is the most underrated hay because of the widespread practice to cut it late, often in late June or early July. I coined the phrase "Fourth-of-July hay" to describe it. Why is it cut so late? First, because the weather in geographical areas like mine stabilizes during the month of June, and as more days of drier and sunnier weather emerge, the risk of rain decreases. Making hay becomes much easier toward the end of June or beginning of July. Secondly, the yield increases significantly during June. Yet nutrient content and palatability decrease rapidly. If the same hay were to be cut in late May or during the first week of June before the dominant grass species bloom, such hay would be high in amount and form of energy and the protein content would be high also.

Moving on to "second" cutting: you may have noticed that I keep putting the word second in quotes. That is because I see a widespread habit to call any hay that isn't first cutting hay as second cutting hay. Maybe in some parts of the country, hay is properly labeled, including terms like third cutting or fourth cutting and so on, specifying specifically when it was cut, but around here and in the wanted ads, I see it labeled as second cutting. So, if your second cutting hay is true second cutting hay, following an **early** first cut about six weeks or so later and thus is cut in July, you still have a hay high in nutrients, both energy and protein. However, if it was cut much later, following a cut of "Fourth-of-July" hay, you are likely to have less of an energy content. And any subsequent cut is as beautiful as hay can look, but not hay you want to consider as winter feed to keep your ewes as fat as possible. This applies particularly to hay that grew during the fall flush. Energy levels are especially low at that time. "Eine Hand voll Grass im Frühjahr ist mehr wert als ein Arm voll im Herbst." (A hand full of grass in the spring is worth more than an arm full in the fall.) It is energy that fattens sheep. It is energy that keeps sheep warm in the winter.

Photos by Author

Now let's discuss how to assess energy and protein content without doing an analysis in the lab, which is often not available or not practical when you for instance buy hay at an auction. Many publications lead us to believe that the protein content of good hay should reach a number in the high teens or even higher.

Thus, let me establish a "rule" with the understanding that any rule has its exceptions: if the hay you are seeking is likely to have a high energy content because it was cut at a time of year when the energy content is high, especially in its most desirable form of sugars, e.g. cut in early spring, and if such hay was dried rapidly without receiving any rain or if rain was received, only in a small amount of a couple of tenths of an inch, followed by rapid drying, then the protein level of such hay is likely also high enough, quite possibly breaking the 10 percent mark by a few points and is thus high enough in protein.



All hay is stored inside on pallets to retain as much of the good quality as possible.

The reverse of such a rule is not necessarily true: if the hay in question has a high or high enough protein content, the level of energy may not be satisfactory. This applies particularly to hay that was cut during the fall flush, especially if it is grass-hay. It is likely lacking in energy.

If the hay is weedy but was cut early, the weeds likely won't matter. Their nutritional value is often competitive since many weeds have a high feed value. Of course, hay with seeds of weeds should be avoided, but if there were seeds, such hay would no longer fit my description of early cut hay.

Having spent much ink on the quality of winter forage, I wish to wiggle out of a statement about alfalfa hay. I have been told that alfalfa is an exception to the rule since it is high in energy throughout the year. I have no experience with alfalfa hay and will refrain from having an opinion about it.

Once you start feeding hay or baleage in the winter, it must not be rationed. Likewise, the sheep should not be forced to finish every stem before receiving new hay. Expect a certain waste, expect to feed a bit more than the books will tell you. Remember that this is your only source of nutrition and is supposed to substitute for grain as well. That is a tall order for a feed that is even less nutrient dense than good pasture.

Personally, I feed dry hay, mostly early cut first cutting, trying hard to avoid any rains that wash out sugars. However, if you are good at making baleage or haylage, you will make winter feed higher in nutrients than dry hay. Just watch out for moldy haylage! Sheep are extremely sensitive to it and can easily catch listeriosis (circling disease) when feeding on moldy haylage.

Moving on to another key to success, which is to reduce any form of stress. *Ruhe und Rast sind die halbe Mast.* (Quiet and rest account for half of the fattening.) Here are some ideas to reduce stress:

1. Herding dogs should be well trained and obedient and should not harass the sheep. Any guard dog should be discouraged from chasing sheep and "playing" with them.

2. On hot days, shade should be offered to avoid direct sunlight during the hottest hours of the day.

3. Shelter should be offered in the form of windbreaks on cold and windy days. Such shelter can consist of hedgerows, woods, or anything else that can break the wind. It does not always have to be a roof over their heads.

4. Any disease can stress sheep and reduce performance. Limping is high on the list of reducing animal performance although it may not always be a matter of disease like footrot or foot scald and can be foreign objects like rocks, thorns, or dirt causing infections or pressure that cause limping. A limping sheep is not feeling well, will not eat as much as it should, and will not perform well either!

5. Parasites can stress animals as well. The most common parasites I came across are the barber pole worm, which can be deadly, and coccidiosis in lambs and young ewes. Knowledge about parasites and how to counter them will be essential. Internal parasites are more frequent when grazing than they are when sheep and lambs are fed in the barn.

Some of these points may seem a no-brainer to you, the reader. However, I see a lot of willful ignorance out there when it comes to the well-being of animals. While I

think it is an ethical obligation to do right for the animals that are in one's care, it is certainly also an economic necessity.

That sums up my list of suggestions to be successful raising sheep on forage alone, addressing both genetics of the sheep and the management. If this is too much management for anyone, I have another solution: Finishing lambs on grain is always an option. It will cost you more, but it requires far less management, only more labor and more money. However, next time you wonder why the carcasses of my market lambs look so meaty and have all that nice fat cover despite never seeing an ounce of grain, you now know why. I just told you all my "secrets."

Ulf owns and operates White Clover Sheep Farm and breeds and raises grass-fed White Dorper sheep without any grain feeding and offers breeding stock suitable for grazing. He is a native of Germany and lives in the US since 1995. He farms in the Finger Lakes area in upstate New York. His website address is www.whitecloversheepfarm.com. He can be reached by e-mail at ulf@whitecloversheepfarm.com or by phone during "calling hour" indicated on the answering machine at 585-554-3313.